

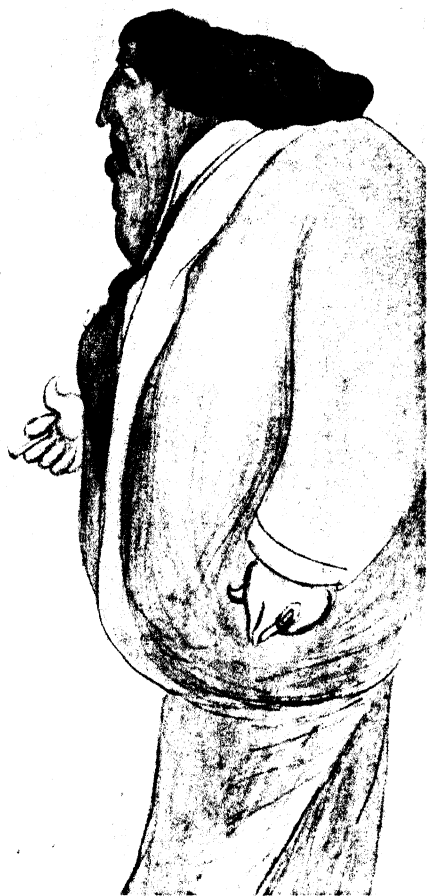
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**SIXTEEN LETTERS
FROM
OSCAR WILDE**



SIXTEEN LETTERS FROM

OSCAR WILDE

EDITED AND WITH NOTES BY

JOHN ROTHENSTEIN

LONDON

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by Max Beerbohm
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EDITOR'S NOTE

The sixteen letters that follow are the remains of a series written by Oscar Wilde to William Rothenstein between 1891 and 1900.

They are now published, for the first time, in deference to the often-expressed wishes of several of the writer's surviving friends. One of them, number VIII, I remember hearing M. André Gide describe as the most important unpublished Wilde letter he knew of. Wilde possessed to a singular degree the power of endowing everything he touched, however lightly, with something of his own personality. Even such things as envelopes bear, at times, the impress of his fancy. So here the form of address, where the envelope still exists, is printed beneath the appropriate letter.

To the letters where the writer has put none, the actual or approximate date has been added in brackets.

Finally, I should like to record my gratitude to Mr. Max Beerbohm for his very kind permission to reproduce in this book two of his hitherto unpublished caricatures.

J. R.

SIXTEEN LETTERS
FROM
OSCAR WILDE

29 Boulevard des Capucines
[Paris]

[1891]

My dear Will,

I send you my novel,¹ with my best wishes. It was a great pleasure to see you last night, and it will be a great pleasure to see you tomorrow.

Sincerely yours,
Oscar Wilde.

A
Monsieur
M. Will Rothenstein,
23 Rue Fontaine,
Montmartre

¹*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, published in book form by Ward, Lock and Company, April 1891.

51 Friedrich's Promenade
Bad-Homburg

[1892]

My dear Will,

The *Gaulois*, the *Echo de Paris*, and the *Pall Mall* have all had interviews. I hardly know what new thing there is to say. The Licenser of Plays is nominally the Lord Chamberlain, but really a commonplace official -- in the present case a Mr. Pigott -- who panders to the vulgarity and hypocrisy of the English people, by licensing every low farce and vulgar melodrama -- he even allows the stage to be used for the purpose of the caricaturing of the personalities of artists, and at the same moment when he prohibited *Salome*,¹ he licensed a burlesque of *Lady Windermere's Fan* in which an actor dressed up like me and imitated my voice and manner!!!

The curious thing is this: all the arts are free in

¹ *Salome*, written in French in 1892, was being rehearsed for production at the Palace Theatre, London, in that same year, with Madame Sarah Bernhardt in the leading part, when it was prohibited by the Censor.

England, except the actor's art; it is held by the Censor that the stage degrades and that the actors desecrate fine subjects—so the Censor prohibits not the publication of *Salome* but its production: yet, not one single actor has protested against this insult to the stage—not even Irving, who is always prating about the art of the actor —this shows how few actors are artists. All the *dramatic* critics except Archer of *The World* agree with the Censor that there should be a censorship over actors and acting! This shows how bad our stage must be, and also shows how Philistine the English journalists are.

I am very ill, dear Will, and can't write any more.

Ever yours,

Oscar Wilde.

III

34 High Street
Oxford

[1893]

Dear Will,

I should like Bosie¹ to be framed. I think a black and white frame with *no* margin or mounting.

The lovely drawing is complete in itself. It is a great delight to me to have so exquisite a portrait of a friend done by a friend also—and I thank you very much for letting me have it.

Enclosed is an absurdly coloured thing—which foolish bankers take in exchange and for which they give, in reckless moments, gold, both yellow and red—

Ever yours,

Oscar.

*Will Rothenstein, Esq.,
5 King Edward Street,
[Oxford].*

¹ Lord Alfred Douglas, the poet, of whom the artist made two drawings during that year. The one here referred to shows the sitter, full length and in profile, seated in an arm-chair. It was commissioned by Wilde, and afterwards came into the possession of More Adey, but its present whereabouts is unknown.



IV

The Hotel Albemarle
Piccadilly
London

[1895]

My dear Will,

I have always been fond of you, and your art is always dear to me. I had been told that you wanted to take sides¹—that was all—and foolish as it is to take sides in a one-sided quarrel, or attack rather, still charming people are foolish often. So I did not go to see you in Paris. But when I saw you in St. James' Street, I had to jump from my hansom and shake hands with my friend.

When I go to Paris I shall await your coming, and we shall be merry, as of old, at Sylvains.

Always affectionately yours,

Oscar.

¹The unfortunate young artist found himself between two fires: for Wilde and Whistler were at this time even more hostile than usual, and his close friendship with Whistler was regarded by Wilde as a sign of antagonism to himself.

V

New Travellers' Club
Piccadilly, W.

[April 26th, 1894]

Dear Will,

I am off to Paris tomorrow—on my return I shd. love to sit to you—mais cette fois un vrai portrait, pas un paysage.

Yours,
Oscar.

*Will Rothenstein, Esq.,
53 Gt. Gt. Place,
Chelsea, S.W.*

Three years before, early in 1891, Wilde had sat to Rothenstein in his studio at 25 rue Fontaine, Montmartre. He was shown half length, facing three-quarters to the left. Wilde, although he praised this study in pastel, disliked it as a portrait—hence his plea for a 'real portrait'. He complained that his eyes (of which he was particularly proud) were portrayed too small. When the artist showed him that he was mistaken he remarked, 'You see eyes small, I see them large'. He nevertheless acquired it and it remained in his possession until it was stolen from him, some years later, in Naples.

VI

The Haven
5 Esplanade
Worthing

[1894]

Dear Will,

At 8 Glebe Place resides a very sweet and lovely girl – a Miss Marion Grey;¹ she has been on the stage, but is anxious to also sit as a model to painters – will you ask her to come and see you and, if you like give her some *recommendations* and advice –

I am away by the seaside bathing and sailing and amusing myself. How are you?

Yours Oscar.

¹ Miss Grey sat to the artist for several years. She is the subject of his 'Porphyria', painted in 1894, now in a private collection in New York, and also of a slight drawing entitled 'Chloe', given to Aubrey Beardsley and reproduced on page 109 in the first number of *The Savoy*, January 1896.

VII

Hôtel des Deux Mondes
22 Avenue de l'Opéra
Paris

[May 3rd, 1894]

Dear Will,
By all means, if you like—¹

Truly,
Oscar.

Love to the Valistes.²

*Monsieur Will Rothenstein,
53 Glebe Place,
Chelsea,
Londres, S.W.
Angleterre.*

¹ This in response to the artist's suggestion of exhibiting the pastel referred to in the note on the preceding letter, at an exhibition held with Charles Shannon at the Dutch Gallery, Brook Street, W.

² Charles Ricketts and Shannon, known as the Valistes by their occupancy of a house in the Vale, Chelsea.

VIII

From M. Sebastian Melmoth¹

Hôtel de la Plage

Berneval-sur-Mer

Dieppe

Wednesday [June 9th.² 1897]

My dear good Friend,

I cannot tell you how pleased I was to get your kind and affectionate letter yesterday, and I look forward with real delight to the prospect of seeing you, though it be only for a day. I am going into Dieppe to breakfast with the Stannards,³ who have been most kind to me, and I will send you a telegram from there. I so hope you can come tomorrow by the daily boat, so that you and your friend can dine and sleep here. There is no one in this little inn but myself, but it is most comfortable, and the chef, there is a real chef—is an artist of great distinction;

¹The pseudonym assumed by Wilde for some time after his release. The surname belonged originally to a character in a novel written by his kinsman, Charles Robert Maturin.

²He was released from Reading Gaol on May 19th.

³Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Stannard. She wrote under the name of John Strange Winter.

he walks in the evening by the sea to get ideas for the next day. Is it not sweet of him? I have taken a chalet for the whole season for £32, so I shall be able I hope to work again, and write plays or something.

I know, dear Will, you will be pleased to know that I have not come out of prison an embittered or disappointed man. On the contrary. In many ways I have gained much. I am not really ashamed of having been in prison: I often was in more shameful places: but *I am* really ashamed of having led a life unworthy of an artist. I don't say that Messalina is a better companion than Sporus, or that the one is all right and the other all wrong: I know simply that a life of definite and studied materialism, and philosophy of appetite and cynicism, and a cult of sensual and senseless ease, are bad things for an artist: they narrow the imagination, and dull the more delicate sensibilities. I was all wrong, my dear boy, in my life. I was not getting the best out of me. *Now*, I think that with good health, and the friendship of a few good, simple nice fellows like yourself, and a quiet mode of living, with isolation for thought, and freedom from the endless hunger for pleasures that wreck

day. Is it not sweet of him.
I have taken a chalet for
the whole season for £32. 50
I shall be able I hope to
work again, & write plays
or something.

I know, dear Will,
you will be pleased to know
that I have not come out
of prison an embittered
or disappointed man. On
the contrary. In many ways
my life has gained much. I am
not really ashamed of
having been in prison. I
often see in more shameful

the body and imprison the soul,—well, I think I may do things yet, that you all may like. Of course I have lost much, but still, my dear Will, when I reckon up all that is *left* to me, the sun and the sea of this beautiful world; its dawns dim with gold and its nights hung with silver; many books, and all flowers, and a few good friends; and a brain and body to which health and power are not denied—really I am *rich* when I count up what I still have: and as for money, my money did me horrible harm. It wrecked me. I hope just to have enough to enable me to live simply and write well.

So remember that you will find me in many respects very happy—and of course by your sweetness in coming to see me, you will bring me happiness along with you.

As for the silent songs on stone,¹ I am charmed at the prospect of having society of yours. It is awfully good of you to think of it. I have had many sweet presents, but none I shall value more than yours.

You ask me if you can bring me anything from

¹ Wilde's name, plagiarized from Whistler, for Rothenstein's lithographs.

London. Well, the salt soft air kills my cigarettes, and I have no box in which to keep them. If you are in a millionaire condition and could bring me a box for keeping cigarettes in, it would be a great boon. In Dieppe there is nothing between a trunk and a *bonbonnière*. I do hope to see you tomorrow (Thursday) for dinner and sleep. If not, well Friday morning. I am up now at 8 oc. regularly!

I hope you never forget that *but for me* you would not be *Will* Rothenstein: *Artist*. You would simply be *William* Rothenstein, *R.A.* It is one of the most important facts in the history of art.¹

I look forward greatly to seeing Strangman.² His translating *Lady Windermere* is delightful.

Your sincere and grateful friend,
Oscar Wilde.

*Will Rothenstein, Esquire, Artist,
53 Glebe Place, Chelsea, S.W.,
Londres, Angleterre.*

¹ A general statement, and not, as might appear, a direct allusion to elections to the Royal Academy.

² Edward Strangman, who was making a French translation of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, was anxious to meet its author, and applied to Rothenstein, who took him to see Wilde at Berneval on June 10th.

IX

Berneval-sur Mer

August 14, 07

My dear Will,

I don't know if the enclosed will suit.¹ If so, pray use it. Also don't forget to come and see me as soon as possible. I simply long for your delightful companionship. Robbie Ross² and Sherard³ are here at present. The latter goes away today—we all go to Dieppe to dine with Smithers.⁴

Ever yours, Oscar.

¹My father was planning his 'English Portraits', a series of lithographed drawings. Each of the twenty four portraits was to be accompanied by an unsigned biographical notice, but the artist planned to make a collective acknowledgement to their authors at the beginning of the book. Wilde was at this time the object of almost universal ostracism, and Rothenstein felt that by asking him to participate in the book he would perhaps afford him some small measure of sorely needed encouragement. He accordingly invited him to write on W. E. Henley. But the contribution he submitted—which is given on p. 28—was written in a style so exaggeratedly personal as to leave no doubt as to the identity of its author. As this was contrary to the principle of the book the artist found it difficult to use as it stood.

²Robert Baldwin Ross, Wilde's friend and literary executor.

³Robert Harborough Sherard, friend and biographer of the writer.

⁴Leonard Smithers, a publisher. Wilde emphasised his name because the artist disliked him.

He founded a school and has survived all his disciples. He has always thought too much about himself, which is wise; and written too much about others, which is foolish. His prose is the beautiful prose of a poet, and his poetry the beautiful poetry of a prose-writer. His personality is insistent. To converse with him is a physical no less than an intellectual recreation. He is never forgotten by his enemies, and often forgiven by his friends. He has added several new words to the language, and his style is an open secret. He has fought a good fight and has had to face every difficulty except popularity.

X

Berneval-sur-Mer

August 24th, 97

My dear Will,

Of course I only did it to oblige you. My name was not to be appended, nor was there to be any honorarium of any kind. It was to oblige you I did it—but with me, as with you, as with all artists, one's work *est à prendre ou à laisser*. I couldn't go into the details of coarse and notorious facts. I know Henley edited the *National Observer*, and was a very bitter and in some respects a cowardly journalist in his conduct: I get the historical Review regularly, and its silliness and stupidity are beyond words. I am only concerned with the essence of the man, not with his accidents—miry or other.

When I said of W. E. H. that his prose was the prose of a poet, I paid him an undeserved compliment. His prose is jerky, spasmodic, and he is incapable of the beautiful architecture of a long sentence, which is the fine flower of prose-writing, but I praised him for the sake of an antithesis—'his poetry is the beautiful

poetry of a prose-writer'¹—that refers to Henley's finest work: the Hospital Poems—which are in *vers libres*—and *vers libres* are prose. The author by dividing the lines shows you the rhythm he wishes you to follow. But all that one is concerned with is *literature*: poetry is not finer than prose, nor prose finer than poetry—when one uses the words poetry and prose, one is merely referring to certain technical modes of word-music, the melody and harmony one might say—though they are not exclusive terms—and though I praised Henley too much, too extravagantly, when I said his prose was the beautiful prose of a poet, the latter part of the sentence is a subtle aesthetic appreciation of his *vers libres* which W. E. H., if he has any critical faculty left, would be the first to appreciate. You seem to me to have misunderstood the sentence—Mallarmé would understand it. But the matter is of no importance. Everybody is greedy of common panegyrics—and W. E. H. would much sooner have a long list of his literary failures chronicled with dates.

¹ An illuminating illustration of the complete separation, in Wilde's mind, of the ideas of form and content; and no less so of his willingness to sacrifice the second to the first.

I am still here though the wind blows terribly--- your lovely lithographs are on my walls, and you will be pleased to hear that I do not propose to ask you to alter them, though I am *not* the Editor of a 'paying Publication'.

I am delighted to hear the Monticelli¹ is sold, though Obach does not say for how much. Dal Young² is coming out here tomorrow and I will tell him. He seems to be under the impression that he bought it. Of course I know nothing about the facts of the case.

Robbie Ross had to go back to England on Thursday last, and I fear will not be able to come again this year.

I don't know where I shall go myself. I am not in the mood to do the work I want -- and I fear I shall never be. The intense energy of creation has been kicked out of me. I don't care now to struggle to get back what, when I had it, gave me little pleasure.

Ever yours,

Oscar.

¹ A painting belonging originally to Wilde which was bought at the sale of his effects, and resold for his benefit, by Rothenstein.

² Dalhousie Young, the composer, and author of a book on Wilde.

XI

Café Suisse
Angle des Arcades
17 & 19
Grande Rue
1 & 3
[Dieppe]

Friday [1897]

Dearest Will,

I knew you would get nervous. I told you so! Therefore either let me have back my appreciation of W. E. H. which will be useful to me in a thing I have been asked to do—*Artistic London*—notes on notabilities and mediocrities. Or, if you still want it, get some one else to do Henley from the *outside* point of view¹—just the account of what he has done. His editorship of the periodicals—his plays with R. L. S.² etc. Mine you will call,

W. E. Henley
by
A Private Admirer

¹ This suggestion was not in accord with the plan of the book. The note on Henley was finally done by Max Beerbohm.

² Robert Louis Stevenson.



the other,

W. E. Henley

by

A National Observer

Of course *mine* must come *last*; and the National Observer must confine himself to the *facts* of his life. This is the only solution.

I have nearly finished my own poem;¹ and like it awfully.

Yours,

Oscar.

XII

Café Suisse
Angle des Arcades
17 & 19
Grande Rue
1 & 3
Dieppe

[August 20th, 1897]

Dear Will,

I am going to *Rouen*—Hôtel d'Angleterre—for a week. The weather at Berneval is too British for anything.

Do try and come for a few days—Reggie Turner¹ is there, and you need not make a lithograph of him—

Oscar.

*Will Rothenstein,
Editeur de La Revue Sérieuse,
Hotel de la Porte,
Fezelay,
Yonne.*

¹The novelist.

XIII

[Berneval-sur-Mer]

[A POSTCARD]

September 2nd [1897]

My dear Will,

Thanks so much for the cheque for £15¹ which is most welcome. When will you come and see me? I think of going south, if I can manage it, in a fortnight.

Yours,

Oscar.

¹ Part of the proceeds of the sale of the Monticelli referred to in Letter X.

XIV

La Maison Rouge
Hôtel, Café, Restaurant
A. B. Vié
La Roche-Guyon, (S & O)

[1897]

My dear Will,

So sorry to miss you. I rowed down in Blunt's¹ boat and Madame Richard came to breakfast and Conder² and Blunt have gone back part of the way with her. I shall come over tomorrow about 3 o'clock to see you and the rose-like lady³ whom I admire and like so much. I hear the wild-haired poet⁴ has gone back to Paris—but is to return—so we must have 'a night wic' Robbie Burns'. (I believe that is Scotch.)

Yours,
Oscar.

¹ Arthur Blunt, the artist.

² Charles Conder, the artist.

³ Miss Alice Knewstub, afterwards Mrs. William Rothenstein.

⁴ John Pringle Nichol.

X V

Hôtel de Nice
Rue des Beaux-Arts
Paris

[1898]

My dear Will,

I cannot tell you how touched I am by your letter, and by all you say of my poem.¹ Why on earth don't you write literary criticisms for papers? I wish the *Ballad* had fallen into your hands. No one has said things so *sympathiques*, so full of delicate insight, so large, from the point of view of art, as you. Your letter has given me more pleasure, more pride, than anything has done since the poem appeared.

Yes: it is something to have made a 'sonnet out of skilly'—(Cunninghame Graham² will explain to you what skilly is. You must never know my personal experience). And I *do* think the whole affair 'realised'—and that is triumph.

¹*The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Published by Leonard Smithers, 1898.

²It is assumed that Cunninghame Graham obtained this information when he himself suffered a term of imprisonment as a result of the part he played in the Trafalgar Square riots.

I hope you will be in Paris some time this spring, and come and see me.

I see by the papers that you are still making mortals immortal—and I wish you were working for a Paris newspaper, and that I could see your work making kiosques lovely.

Ever yours,

Oscar.

XVI

Kalisaya¹

[Paris]

Wednesday [October 4th, 1899]

Dear Will,

I have heard nothing from you -- so I suppose you are busy--Do let us meet before you leave. My kindest regards to your dear wife, and also to the charming Celtic poet in colour² --

Oscar.

Monsieur Will Rothenstein

5 Rue le Beaune

[Paris]

¹ I have been unable to discover the significance of this word.

² Augustus John, who had been staying at Vattetot in Normandy with my father, sitting for his picture 'The Doll's House', now in the National Gallery, Millbank. John then went on to Paris with his host, who took him to see Wilde.

